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SUBJECT: VIETNAM'S LARGEST DRUG CASE EVER

REF: Hanoi 663

1. (U) Summary and Comment: Recent counternarcotics successes, culminating in the arrest of the key members of a drug syndicate billed as the nation's largest ever, have not lifted the flagging spirits of Vietnam's counterdrug officers. Departing from their usual relentlessly optimistic propaganda, GVN police have acknowledged that trafficking into Vietnam is increasing and that enforcement and interdiction efforts are not deterring traffickers from pursuing the astronomical profits available to them. Based on what we know and are continuing to learn about the extent of the drug problem here, it appears that U.S. assistance in this fight - although modest - is well leveraged and targeted in the right places. End Summary and Comment.

2. (U) Vietnam's state-controlled media has recently given prominent coverage to what was described as the "largest drug case ever" in Vietnam. The Ministry of Public Security (MPS) began its official investigation of 47 suspects arrested in connection with the case. The network is believed to have moved nearly 2000 pounds of heroin into Vietnam between the years 2000 and 2003. According to one deputy director in the Ho Chi Minh City Police, revenues of this "syndicate" exceeded the revenues of some Vietnamese provinces. The trial is expected to begin by December 2004.

3. (U) According to press articles, MPS and UNODC sources, the "syndicate" formed when drug criminals Nguyen Van Hai and Nguyen Dinh Hoanh met in prison in 1983 and reached its peak in terms of membership and activity in August 2002. In June 2003, Hoanh was arrested at Lao Bao border crossing for transporting approximately 60 kilograms of heroin. Hoanh and Hai worked together to smuggle heroin from Laos into Vietnam for consumption in Dong Nai Province and Ho Chi Minh City. In addition to the Hoanh-Hai syndicate, Hai also set up his own network to bring drugs into the country via Tay Ninh Province, which sits between Ho Chi Minh City and the Cambodia border. Between 2000 and 2003, according to various reports, the syndicate brought in 800 to 900 kilograms of heroin. MPS has started a formal investigation against 47 individuals, 20 of whom are still at large.

VIETNAM -- MORE DRUGS EVERY YEAR

4. (U) In addition to traditional "hotspots" (a Vietnamese police term for an area of increased drug consumption), drugs can now be found in every corner of the country. During a conference to "share experiences in combating complicated hotspots" held in Haiphong on September 21, General Pham Van Duc, Deputy Director of the MPS General Department of Police, acknowledged "negative developments" in the country's drug situation. However, he noted, the police had cracked down on 3,000 hotspots throughout Vietnam between 2001 and 2004, and opened 5,600 cases and seized 180 kilograms of heroin during the first eight months of 2004. (Note: This is a substantial increase over the same period last year, which saw an increase over the year before. See refetel for more on 2004 anti-drug efforts by the GVN. End note.)

COMMENT

5. (U) The GVN is facing a classic dilemma: the more success it has in uncovering drug trafficking, the more it learns about the scope of the problem. Previously, the drug problem could be whitewashed with official propaganda about successful drug raids and effective prevention plans; as long as the drugs were invisible, the government could pretend they were not there. Now, however, GVN anti-drug forces are having some successes - seizures are way up from previous years - and the information gained from these successes and reported in the press is shining an uncomfortable spotlight on the magnitude of the drug trafficking problem here. MPS seems not to have figured out how to spin the recent seizures and arrests as a victory for law enforcement efforts rather than as proof of failure; instead, it has either provided strangely inaccurate information (such as press reports in June hailing a 21

percent reduction in drug crimes) or kept quiet about drug statistics altogether. In this context, General Duc's openness at the Haiphong meeting was an improvement. Based on what we know and are continuing to learn about the extent of the drug problem here, it appears that the assistance we are providing - in the form of training for customs and border officials, and through UNODC to cover the main drug crossing routes into the country - is targeting the right geographical regions and strengthening GVN capacity in the areas it is most needed. End Comment.

MARINE